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Born in 1883, King Faisal I of Iraq was a seminal figure not only in the founding of the state of Iraq but also in the making of the modern Middle East. In all the tumult leading to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of new Arab states, Faisal was a central player. His life traversed each of the important political, military, and intellectual developments of his times. This comprehensive biography is the first to provide a fully rounded picture of Faisal the man and Faisal the monarch. Ali A. Allawi recounts the dramatic events of his subject's life and provides a reassessment of his crucial role in developments in the pre- and post-World War I Middle East and of his lasting but underappreciated influence in the region even 80 years after his death. A battle-hardened military leader who, with the help of Lawrence of Arabia, organized the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire; a leading representative of the Arab cause, alongside Gertrude Bell, at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919; a founding father and king of the first independent state of Syria; the first king of Iraq—in his many roles Faisal overcame innumerable crises and opposing currents while striving to build the structures of a modern state. This book is the first to afford his contributions to Middle East history the attention they deserve.

Faisal I of Iraq Details

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Jerome says

A slow but revealing and balanced biography of Faisal. Allawi does a great job showing Faisal's evolution from careful, conservative Ottoman loyalist to a fiery revolutionary and finally to an idealistic statesman. Allawi ably portrays Faisal's intelligence, charm, and moodiness. Allawi also argues that Faisal was the real founder of Iraq (rather than Cox or Bell)

Some readers will be drawn to this book due to an interest in T.E. Lawrence. They might be disappointed. The book sometimes reads like a sketchy overview and Allawi's rendition of the Arab Revolt is relatively short. He also seems to rely heavily on Lawrence's memoirs for this section, and he also argues that Lawrence's role was not as important as some other British officers. The book's pace picks up after 1918 when Allawi describes the complicated politics of Syria and the impact of the Paris talks. Allawi's style is nuanced and nobody comes off purely as a hero or a villain.

A rich and nuanced biography, although the typos are annoying. Also, the narrative is not as thorough as the book's size suggests: there is little insight into Faisal's character.

Trista says

Reading in compliment to other history books on this place and time, I found FASIAL 1 to be an excellent "fill in the gaps" on the history of the formation of Iraq and the overall struggle for self governance in Arabia. The writing is clear and precise. Very much appreciate the view of events through this political figure.

Abid Alrahman says

I highly recommend this definite and beautiful book regarding one of the most important rulers of his time. No man is perfect and he certainly had his flaws but he worked tirelessly to aim for his grandiose dream: independence.

I loved the book.

Sullivan has provided a beautiful summary of this mammoth here: <https://www.mepc.org/faisal-i-iraq>

Michael O'Brien says

The Middle East we know today was shaped largely by the decisions and actions of men 90-100 years ago --- almost all of whom you've never heard of. One of those men was Faisal I of Iraq. For those familiar with the 1962 movie, "Lawrence of Arabia", he is known in that as Prince Faisal.

The book ably covers the life of a remarkable man ---- one who led the Arab armies advised by Lawrence of Arabia that helped turned the tide against the Central Powers in the Middle East during WWI. Having collapsed the Ottoman Empire, it now fell upon the victorious Allies and men like Faisal to try to rebuild the ruins. In that, given the unfortunate Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and Great Britain, these were arbitrarily divided between them --- irrespective of the desires of the peoples within them -- or their various ethnic and religious groups.

Reading this biography, we see a man transformed from a minor tribal figure to a military leader to a diplomat and political leader and, eventually, into Iraq's first leader. In this role, I think that Faisal is most fascinating. As we read of Faisal's efforts to forge a deeply divided Iraq --- comprised of fragments of former Ottoman provinces, it's clear that the same problems that America dealt with in the aftermath of its invasion of Iraq bear little difference from that confronted by the British and by Faisal in their governance and administration of this artificial nation-state.

Faced with an Iraq in which its people identified with their own ethnic and religious groups more than as Iraqis, with a devastated economy, no infrastructure, and seemingly intractable problems, Faisal took the helm of what by any standards was already a basket case. Notwithstanding, this book shows how Faisal manages to balance the various factions' concerns and strife, and cobble together Iraq into an independent nation.

Moreover, after reading this, I have to conclude that, whatever their faults, both the British and Faisal did a comparatively better job at getting Iraq started after WWI than did the Americans after Iraqi Freedom in getting it restarted. One wonders if, perhaps, Bush Administration policy makers had read this book, if they might have made different decisions than they did in the reconstruction of Iraq --- or, perhaps, after reading the difficulties in governing Iraq, they may even have reconsidered getting bogged down in Iraq in the first place.

At the end, I walked from this seeing Faisal quite possibly as the best leader Iraq ever had. Had his successors been as wise and as pragmatic instead of variously self-indulgent, incompetent, vicious, cruel and sectarian, perhaps the Iraq we have today might have turned out far better than the failed state we have today. Faisal I emerges in this book as someone, while far from perfect, who was far-sighted, practical, intelligent, and just.

I recommend this book for anyone desiring to learn more about the events and people long ago who shaped the Middle East we have today.

Skylar Hatfield says

This is the most challenging book I have ever read to completion. It took me months to finish. It required a consistent steady effort in order to keep the characters and chronology in my mind. In other words, my original approach of reading a few pages here and there did not work for me. Eventually I made the commitment to read only this book (I usually read three at a time). I put the other two books aside and made the press to finish this book. Why would I work so hard to finish a book? For years I have been fascinated with the story of T.E. Lawrence. I am also fascinated with Arabia, because I love deserts, and would love to travel there. The Wall Street Journal wrote a review of the biography that intrigued me. Every time I read a

biography of a world historical figure reveals to me that I know nothing about the world I live in. Usually, I consider myself a well informed person. I read serious press and periodicals. I watch the news. I was a good student. However, every time I learn something new, the realization of what is left to understand becomes engulfing. This book was exhaustive in its details. It took 562 pages to discuss around 20 years of history surrounding one man. But reading it leaves me wanting to know more about the history of Iran and the Ottoman empire. I also want to understand why the Shi'a and Sunni's have come to see themselves so differently and why it is so important for each sect to have total control of a region. Just today, I skimmed an op-ed that said the only way to get control over the ISIS problem in Iraq is to get the Shi'a to share political power with the Sunni's. This is an ancient problem that began at least before WWI. And political power just scratches at the surface of their differences. I have always been captivated by the idea of an Arabic state. But reading this book and a biography of Lawrence makes me doubt it is even possible. Or necessary. Certainly watching the news brings doubt to the mind considering a larger Arabic state. Clearly, being Arabic is not the soul characteristic of any person of that descent. And, when you consider the silliness of having a continental home reserved for only those of Latino or Saxon descent, you begin to scratch your head at the efforts of those who seek to have a continent ruled by one race or one religion. I cannot begin to inform you of all the interesting and confounding ideas and efforts of Faisal. He was a man of extreme contradictions. He was duplicitous. He was part dictator and part republican. I don't know if he understood his own heart. I wonder if what he tried to accomplish was worth his health and life. Certainly self-rule is a great ideal. I don't believe in colonialism as I understand it to be. I can see weakness in almost every once colonial outpost. But I am not sure that the nations would be better today if they had never been colonized. There is this idea that aborigines are more pure in their culture, traditions and government. I don't know that I have seen any evidence of that purity. This book brought so many questions to my mind. I think it alone could be the text for a college course. But, if you are like me, you will not be satisfied with reading this book. It opens a Pandora's box.

Margaret Sankey says

From a middle eastern scholar and politician who has fully exploited the archives in multiple languages, this is a massive biography of one of the region's seminal power players, from his time in the Ottoman parliament, a thoroughly unromanticized campaign with T.E. Lawrence, wrangling constituencies and great powers around the Faisal–Weizmann agreement, the Cairo Conference, the Druze uprising, British manipulation of the map and kingmaking and the roots of so many of the problems that still plague the area now.

Philip says

This book is an incredible history of the Middle East during and after World War I. It is the first time that I have really gained an understanding of the Arab Revolt, T. E. Lawrence, and the things like the Sykes-Picot Treaty and the Balfour Declaration. It is nice to get these things in biographical form. The book is by an Arab speaker so has many sources not available beforehand. The book is clearly favorable to the subject and sympathetic to him. And dotes more on history than his personal life, so could better be called "Faisal I and His Time." It has very little on his personal life and less about his many months each year in Europe. Still, a must read about the Middle East.
